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Foreword

Grounding the Spell

The Fairy Tale Film and Transformation

Jack Zipes

In *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (1996), edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and advertised as "the definitive history of cinema worldwide," there is not one word about fairy tale films. Even in the chapter on animation, the term "fairy tale" does not appear. All this is very strange, if not bizarre, given the fact that two fairy tale films—*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)—are among the most popular films in the world and have had a significant impact on cinema up through the present. The exclusion of fairy tale film as a category from *The Oxford History of World Cinema* is even stranger when one considers that the godfather and pioneer of film narrative, Georges Méliès, produced close to thirty films that were superb *féeries* and numerous directors in Europe and America created well over forty silent fairy tale films at the beginning of the twentieth century. Moreover, Walt Disney and Lotte Reiniger began their great cinematic careers in the 1920s by adapting fairy tales, and nothing much has been made of their great debt to folklore and the fairy tale genre. Indeed, aside from a number of essays and a couple of books that touch on the subject, film critics, folklorists, and literary historians in America and Europe have not realized how much films owe to folklore and the fairy tale. It is for this reason, I believe, that the publication of Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix's *Fairy Tale Films* is path breaking and will fill a gap in both film studies and folklore.

Not only do the essays in Greenhill and Matrix's critical study fill a need, but they are also original in their concept, insightful, and based on thorough research. To be sure, they cannot cover all the fairy tale lacunae in

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film studies; they cannot magically discuss every aspect of the fairy tale film. The focus of the book is mainly on North American, Mexican, and British films produced in the past forty years. And not all the films covered in the book, such as the adaptations of the Harry Potter novels and the fantasy films of Tim Burton and Stanley Kubrick, are, strictly speaking, fairy tale films. However, the motifs, characters, and plots of these films have clearly been borrowed from fairy tales, and they exemplify how complicated the definition of a literary or film genre can be.

If we begin with a valid thesis that there is no such thing as a pure genre, but there are distinctive characteristics and plots that alert us to regularities in similar works of art, we can trace a marvelous evolution of the oral wonder tale in the western world and see how it contributed to the formation of the literary fairy tale as a genre in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and how the oral and literary traditions conspired or colluded to reach out to other forms of art to propagate their wonder and fairy tales. We can also easily recognize how the wonder tale and fairy tale were adapted and transformed over five centuries through solo storytelling, gala performances, opera, the ballet, the salon, theater, opera buffo, the magic lantern, vaudeville, extravaganzas, shows at fairs, painting, book illustrations, and card and video games. By the time Méliès arrived on the scene in Paris with magic and vaudeville shows in the 1890s, the fairy tale was begging or perhaps even demanding to be made into a film. In short, all the conditions for adapting fairy tales for film had been satisfied.

Méliès's experiments with the fairy tale are good examples of the way he expanded the definition of the genre and demonstrated the way that film could enrich it. Not only did he re-create three literary fairy tales written by Charles Perrault and show a flair for comic invention, but he also freely adapted *The Arabian Nights* and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* and used montage, stop-action, dissolves, folklore, and dream to create his own stories. He borrowed and played with motifs and characters from diverse fairy tales, reversing expectations and creating extravagant spectacles. He invented his own fairy tale skits, developed surreal images as backdrops, and created all sorts of weird monsters, ghosts, ogres, witches, wizards, bizarre animals, whales, gnomes, and fairies. In short, Méliès designed fairy tale films to comment on fairy tales, and in every film he made, he emphasized miraculous transformation. Everything that we may today call fantastic or fantasy was already present in the films of Méliès, and his creative laissez-

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faire attitude toward genre broke conventions and enriched them at the same time.

While Méliès relied heavily on the theater and made almost all of his films in his indoor studios, other producers and filmmakers began shooting outside, making longer films, and modernizing the plots of classical fairy tales such as "Cinderella," "Snow White," and "Little Red Riding Hood." Many of the silent films of the 1920s are set in contemporary America or Europe and change classical fairy tales in diverse ways. The fairy tale cartoons that began with Walt Disney, Lotte Reiniger, Paul Terry, and the Fleischer brothers in the 1920s and early 1930s paved the way for great experimentation that turned traditional fairy tale plots on their heads and exposed the ridiculous aspects of romantic love, fixed gender roles, the greatness of royalty, and so on.

At the same time, however, Disney began changing his original, more provocative approach and gradually became more conventional in adapting the classical fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and Perrault and adhering closer to the traditional plots and patriarchal ideology of nineteenth-century folk and fairy tales. Not only did Disney "straitjacket" his earlier wild experimentation with fairy tales in his production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* by following the conventional plots of American sentimental musicals, sweetening the characters as stereotypes, developing more realistic human figures, and adding cute comical animals to liven the plots, but he continued that practice until his death and established a model of conformity that hundreds of other filmmakers have followed up until today: 1) girl falls in love with young man, often a prince, or wants to pursue her dreams; 2) wicked witch, stepmother, or a force of evil wants to demean or kill girl; 3) persecuted girl is abducted or knocked out of commission; 4) persecuted girl is rescued miraculously either by a prince or masculine helpers; 5) happy ending in the form of wedding, wealth, and rise in social status or reaffirmation of royalty. In many ways, Disney's predictable fairy tale film schemata became classical in the same way that the Grimms' stories served as the model for most early collections of fairy tales in the nineteenth century.

This is not to say that all fairy tale films in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were obliged to acknowledge Disney, whether they were animated or live action. But they certainly paid lip service of some kind since it has been virtually impossible for any filmmaker born after 1945 not to have seen or been exposed to a Disney fairy tale film as a result of the powerful marketing and distribution of all products by the Disney Corporation.

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While the Disney Corporation created the model for what audiences should expect from a fairy tale film and has duplicated this model since then, even with its recent feature, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), it has also set the standards of defining the fairy tale film against which serious and gifted filmmakers have reacted.

In every genre and cultural field, there are forces that collide and joust to attain dominance. By 1959—with the production of *Sleeping Beauty*—the Disney Studios became the dominant creator of fairy tale films and remains so today, although there have been clear signs since the 1980s that the Disney Corporation may be toppled from the throne. The number of remarkable animated and live-action films in America and Europe during the past twenty years has grown, and these films demand that we regard both fairy tales and fairy tale films no longer with the rosy-colored lens of the Disney Corporation and mass media but with open (ended) eyes.

The essays in *Fairy Tale Films* seek to keep our eyes open and sharpen our perspective. Folk and fairy tales pervade our lives constantly through television soap operas and commercials, in comic books and cartoons, in school plays and storytelling performances, in our superstitions and prayers for miracles, and in our dreams and daydreams. The artistic re-creations of fairy tale plots and characters in film—the parodies, the aesthetic experimentation, and the mixing of genres to engender new insights into art and life—are significant because they mirror possibilities of estranging ourselves from designated roles and the conventional patterns of the classical tales. As Greenhill and Matrix stress in their introduction, "the mirror of fairy tale film reflects not so much what its audience members actually are but how they see themselves and their potential to develop (or, likewise, to regress)."

Of course, as I have tried to show, most standard fairy tale films, such as those produced by the Disney Corporation, Shelley Duvall's *Faerie Tale Theatre,* or the Cannon Group's five fairy tale films, essentially provide hackneyed renditions of fairy tales for commercial profit. They appeal to our craving for regularity and security in our lives. The cutting edge of the criticism in *Fairy Tale Films* reveals differences between films that want to titillate and guarantee happiness and those that want to compel us to engage with open eyes all those haunting dilemmas that cause existential and social problems. Fairy tale films such as Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth,* Nietzchka Keene's *The Juniper Tree,* and Neil Jordan and Angela Carter's *The Company of Wolves* unnerve us because they destabilize our notion of the happy-ended and predictable fairy tale and deal with issues such

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as fascism, rape, and infanticide. Optimistic fairy tale films such as *Ever After* and Disney's *Enchanted* demand that we critically reflect about false and artificial gender definitions and the backlash against feminism. The four *Shrek* films challenge the Disney Corporation and other filmmakers to rethink their fairy tale politics and audiences to reformulate their notions of beauty and what a fairy tale film is supposed to look like and mean. Now, in *Fairy Tale Films*, a book of thoughtful and enlightening essays, we are challenged to reflect about the ways fairy tale films in tantalizingly diverse forms continue to cast their spell on us and ask us to consider possibilities for change, for if the fairy tale film as a genre can produce radical transformation, why can't we?

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